USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANTHEA SHARP
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A Celtic Little Mermaid Retelling

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Fiddlehead Press

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The Sea King's Daughter

THE SURFACE of the North Sea rolled and ruffled quietly beneath the May wind. In the sky overhead, gulls caught the eddies, calling in high, lonely voices. The rocky shore of Eire rose on the horizon, a dark blur of land before the water stretched away for thousands of miles to the west.

Beneath the waters, the calm beauty of the day mattered little. Pale sunshine filtered down, and further down, to the very halls of the Sea King, where the matters of the world above meant very little. His palace rose from the sea bed, whorls of shell and pearl glowing with iridescence. Four fanciful towers, one for each of his daughters, were decked with banners of woven sea grass that waved in the gentle eddies

The open, curved halls were traversed by fishes and merfolk alike on their way to the throne room for the birthday celebrations of the king's youngest daughter, Muireen.

This was not any birthday, however, but the coming of age Muireen had been waiting years for. Finally she was turning seventeen and would be allowed to rise to the surface for her first glimpse of the mortal world.

Six years earlier, her eldest sister Aila had been the first of them to break the surface of the bright water and see what wonders the world above held.

“Tell us, tell us,” her sisters had clamored when she returned, then listened, wide-eyed, to Aila’s descriptions of the wheeling birds, the bright sun, the taste of air in her lungs instead of water.

She had even glimpsed a mortal ship riding majestic over the waves, all unaware of the kingdom they traveled over. Although her bodyguard had not allowed her swim any closer, for fear of discovery, Aila had heard singing, and a strange buzzing instrument not known beneath the sea.

The next sister to rise, Dagmar, had shaken her head dismissively upon her return.

“It’s gray and cold,” she’d said. “Water spits in cold drops from the sky, and the bones of fish float, rotting, in the waves. There is no reason to visit the world above.”

“What of the mortals?” Muireen had asked.

“I saw no sign,” Dagmar said, flat disinterest in her voice.

When the second-youngest sister made her trip to the surface, she proclaimed it “quiet and a bit boring.”

Privately, Muireen vowed that she would swim toward shore. She would stay from dawn to dusk and do everything she could to catch a glimpse of the mortals who inhabited the world of air. Whether or not the guards that would accompany her would allow such a thing was a question she pushed away. Her determination was strong enough to succeed.

For years, Muireen and her sisters had scavenged the shipwrecks scattered on the ocean floor. But while her older siblings had lost interest, Muireen still was fascinated by the strange objects to be found in the detritus. She could not make heads nor tails of many of the items, but whether they were weapons or decorations or strange tools, they piqued her imagination.

“Why can we not visit the surface more than once a year?” she’d asked her father. “Surely we can learn things from the mortals above.”

“No,” the Sea King had said, his voice hard. “The only thing they may teach our kind is death and destruction. Our history is filled with tales of murder, the blood of our people staining the currents while they hunted us down without mercy. Once a year is danger enough.”

Only the weight of law and custom kept her father from forbidding all merfolk from ever rising to the surface.

Today, though, was her day. Muireen’s heart beat faster. Today, she would feel the mystery of the sun on her face, breathe the strangeness of air, hear the sounds of the birds.

And maybe, if luck was with her, she would set her eyes on a mortal.

Eiric Airgead set his carefully folded nets in his small boat, checked that it was not taking on water, then stepped in and pushed off from the stone jetty. The sky overhead cupped the pearly pre-dawn light, and the village’s small harbor was busy with fishermen heading out to make the day’s catch. Half the fleet was already gone, their boats patches of darkness over the pewter water.

The sea wind blew Eiric’s dark hair about his face, the breeze strong enough for him to raise sail. Quickly, his boat flew out, rocking up and down when he hit the rougher water outside the sheltering curve of the harbor. Behind him, whitewashed cottages glowed softly with the dawn over their shoulders. The stone-walled fields and lanes climbed up the hillside, and he could see a half dozen villagers striding up to tend the fields and flocks.

He’d never had the heart of a farmer, himself. The sea always called to him, the waves whispering his name. The village lived by the sea. And died by it, as well—as no doubt would be his own fate.

But while he lived, he'd ride his small boat over the waves, casting his nets beneath the surface to pull up silver shimmering wonders of fishes. He'd sing, and play the tin whistle tucked in his pocket to pass the time. Most of all, he'd know the freedom of the wind and water, the language of current and cloud.

Bright porpoises danced beside his boat, and seals watched him with their large, dark eyes. The huge *Ainmhí Sheoil* moved like a dark shadow below him, but he was wiser than to cast a line for the shark. His boat was too small, his arms too weak.

It took many men in a larger craft to be able to ride out the death run of such a massive fish. Once, one of the village's boats was gone for nearly an entire moon. When they finally returned, they told a harrowing and heroic tale of being dragged far to the north by the basking shark, at last overcoming it, and then making the long journey home. That winter, the village ate well.

Though Eiric fished alone, he contributed enough to the village's stores that he was considered a hard worker, and a good match for any of the lasses. Red-haired Biddy had made it plain she'd welcome him to come courting, but she had a hard edge that Eiric misliked. Perhaps he might instead woo Orla, who tended her flock of sheep, but she was a quiet girl. Too quiet, mayhap.

Eiric's mother was gone, and his father as well, leaving no one to push him toward a marriage he was not certain he wanted. And so he fished, and played tunes up to the sky, and was content to live alone.

Muireen's sisters combed out her hair and braided it with pearls. They burnished the silver-blue scales of her tail until it glowed, and told her she was as beautiful as the sun slanting through the midsummer waves.

When she was finally ready, her sisters accompanied her to the curved-walled, iridescent throne room. There, the king and all the court had assembled to bid Muireen a safe journey to the surface. After an eternity of toasts and speeches, it was at last time for her departure. The currents swirled, tugging at Muireen's hair and slipping over her scales, whispering *come, come*.

"Don't do anything foolish," her eldest sister said as she embraced Muireen in farewell.

"Princess." An older warrior bowed before Muireen, her silver hair braided tightly against her head. "I am to be your bodyguard today. My name is Ceilp."

"Well met, Ceilp," Muireen said. "And thank you for your escort."

The Sea King beckoned, and she went obediently to float before him. *Soon. So soon.*

"Daughter." The king's strong voice sent ripples through the water surrounding them. "Today you will breathe air for the first time and claim your birthright between the worlds. I call upon the blessing of the sun and moon to protect you. I command the tides and currents to carry you safely to the world above, and back home to us. Go now, and see, but take care not to be seen in return. The safety of our people rests in concealment and caution. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father." Muireen dipped her head in consent, but she could not contain the racing of her pulse.

Of course she would be careful, but she would not return until she'd at least glimpsed a mortal. She'd waited her entire life to visit the surface.

The king lifted his scepter made of glimmering shells.

"Safe travels to you Muireen, daughter of the sea," he said. "And to you, warrior Ceilp."

The merfolk and water creatures let out a liquid cheer. Muireen clasped her finned fingers together and bowed to her father. Her escort bowed even

lower, and finally they were free to go.

It took all Muireen's control to keep herself swimming at the sedate pace required by politeness. Although she wanted to give a mighty sweep of her tail to propel her through the pearly opening of the palace gates, the backwash would disrupt the onlookers. Only children and uncouth swimmers sent disruptive wakes when they swam inside the palace. Certainly no princess of the sea would behave so rudely—even though her blood bubbled through her like air, seeking to rise.

Up, up to the brightness above the waves.

When the palace was a glowing shell behind them, Muireen glanced at her guard.

"Might we swim a bit faster?" she asked, trying to control the impatient twitch of her tailfins.

Ceilp frowned slightly. "Very well. I can see you won't settle until you take your first breath of air."

Muireen didn't hesitate. Stretching her arms ahead of her, fingers spread wide, she thrust her tail up, then down and surged forward. The sea pulled past, strands of kelp waving wildly behind them. Small silver fishes scattered before them and Muireen laughed aloud.

Ceilp kept pace on her right, and though she was not smiling, some joy sparked in her eyes.

Far off and below them the water shaded to indigo, marking the territory of the sea witch. Muireen glanced down and shivered. No one ventured into the witch's domain without a very good reason, and even then such a journey was fraught with peril. She was an unsavory creature who wished nothing but ill upon the mer.

Legend held that once she had been the sea king's lover, but that her ill-humored nature had at last turned him against her. She'd been banished from court and left to dwell in the bitter shadows she preferred, stirring up mischief when she could.

Still, her magic was powerful, and sometimes merfolk in great need turned to her when all other hope was lost.

A shaft of sunlight sifted overhead, lightening the sea to a delicious greeny-blue, and Muireen banished all thought of the sea witch. Today there was no room for dark tales and darker waters. Not when the adventure of a lifetime awaited.

Eiric fished all morning, his nets yielding a fair catch. When the sun neared its zenith, he pulled out a hunk of brown bread and some dried fish to make a meal. As he finished, brushing the crumbs overboard, the breeze freshened from the west.

He shaded his eyes with one hand and looked to the horizon. Clouds smudged the line between sea and sky, and he frowned. Might be a storm brewing, or mayhap just a squall, but a wise fisherman knew when it was time to head for shore.

Glancing back toward the sheltering bulk of Eire, he realized with a stab of dismay that he'd gone quite a distance from land. Sometimes the currents were tricky out of the north, pushing small boats such as his from their paths and out to sea.

He'd been careless, focused on the good fishing and the sparkle of sunlight on the water and paying little heed to the wind and waves carrying him away. Quickly, he stowed his nets, then wrestled with the sail. The wind was stubborn, changing direction as soon as he'd caught it. The sail luffed, sounding suspiciously like it was laughing at him.

"Hush now," he said, trying to soothe the coarse cloth as well as his own mounting unease. "We'll make it to shore soon enough."

At that, the wind died down entirely. Eiric let out a breath. Why did the elements mock him so?

He didn’t want to cast his nets or line back out, in case the breeze freshened. To pass the time, he pulled out his tin whistle, the metal warm from where it had rested inside his coat, and began to play.

Perhaps he could coax the wind to rise if he played something sprightly. Fingers flicking over the holes, Eiric spun the bright notes of a jig into the air. The slap of water against the boat kept an arrhythmic counterpoint but, alas, the sky remained still.

He played another jig, then a reel full of flurries and turns, and then a quieter tune, the melody of an old song about a lover lost at sea. He was not a singer, his voice too rough and low, but with the whistle he could sing out, the notes pure and aching.

Something splashed in the waves behind him.

Eiric turned, halting the music, but there was nothing to be seen except a white froth like lace, already dissolving into the blue green waves. Likely it had been a fish leaping, or perhaps a curious seal, drawn by the sound of his music. Still, that didn’t explain the prickling between his shoulder blades.

He waited for several breaths, but whatever it was had gone. Still, he resolved to keep a sharp eye on the water. Fishermen who ignored their instincts went soonest to the bottom of the sea.

“Halt,” Ceilp said when Muireen was only a few lengths from the enticing glimmer of the surface.

Impatience surging through her, Muireen did as her escort asked. Overhead, the bottoms of the waves beckoned.

“Why?” she asked.

Ceilp gave her a serious look. “You have never breathed air before. And although our mer magic should make air no different than water, sometimes

the transition can be awkward."

"I know," Muireen said. "We must take in a long sip of seawater, then let it out in three quick puffs, then rise to the surface and not breathe in for three heartbeats."

"Indeed." Ceilp said. "Remember it well. Also, it helps to be touching someone who has breathed both air and water. It aids the magic for some reason. Wait." She held out her hand to stay Muireen, who could not seem to keep herself from floating up.

"I will rise first to make sure it is safe," the guard said. "Stay two tail lengths below. Once I determine all is well, rise and take my hand. Then we will break the surface together."

Muireen nodded, her pulse racing like a high tide under the mysterious moon.

With a last, stern look, Ceilp swam up, her tail strokes leaving swirls in the current. After what felt an eon, she descended to where Muireen.

"It is safe," she said. "A storm brews in the distance, but that will not concern us."

She held out her hand, the webs between her fingers a pale orange that echoed the burnished hues of her tail. Muireen folded her fingers around Ceilp's and, tails beating the water, they rose.

In her excitement, Muireen nearly forgot to suck in her seawater and let it out in three pulses. Still, she managed, releasing the last bit of liquid just before the top of her head touched that magical, permeable ceiling where water meets air.

Then her whole face emerged. Conscious of the change in her lungs, she held her breath. Her pulse thundered through her body. Once, twice, thrice. Then she opened her mouth and let the air come in, filling the places that had known only salt and the sea.

The world above the ocean was cool and bright. It felt strange to lose the comforting presence of the water against her skin. Her cheeks and lips

and eyes felt bare in a way they never had before, as though something had been peeled away, leaving her exposed.

Her hair was stuck against her head, clinging to her shoulders instead of floating free. And the sounds! Everything was sharp and exciting: the hiss and rush of the water, a high whistling that must be the wind, a distant rumble of surf on stone. The cries of the gulls overhead cut through her.

“Ha!” She could not help her shout of laughter.

“Are you breathing correctly?” Ceilp asked, watching Muireen closely.

“Yes.” The word trembled on Muireen’s lips. Even her voice was different here, lower and husky-sounding.

“Good.” Ceilp released her hand. “Welcome to the world above.”

Muireen spun herself in a circle, taking it in. The birds overhead darted and wheeled like fish in the sky. Strange diaphanous whiteness floated higher in the blue. The sun was too strong to look at, the glossy, hard light on the waves enough to make her squint and blink.

“What is that?” She pointed in the direction the sun rose, where a long, dark shape lay low on the horizon.

“Land,” Ceilp’s said. “The place where humans dwell.”

Muireen’s new-found breath hitched in excitement. “Can we—”

“No.” The older mer’s tone was forbidding. “No good comes from anything mortal.”

“And what is over there?” Murieen nodded in the opposite direction, where a dark haze filled part of the sky.

“That is the look of a storm blowing in. Fear not; we will be safely below before it arrives.”

Muireen frowned. “But I want to see the stars, and the moon, without lengths of water between me and the sky. Surely that is not too much to ask?”

“My duty is to keep you safe, princess.” Ceilp emphasized the last word, reminding Muireen of her station, and responsibilities. “For now, you

ought to practice changing from breathing air to water, so that your body may become used to the sensation. I will keep watch."

With a sigh, Muireen dove beneath the surface. The water wrapped about her like a blanket, comforting, yet almost smothering. She longed to throw it off, to rise and feel the excitement of air about her once again.

What would it be like, to live as a human, wholly above the surface? To be unable to breathe water, to move about on two ungainly stalks, trapped against the ground?

She would never know.

Instead, she distracted herself with chasing a nearby school of porpoise in and out of the waves. Ceilp even joined in as they leaped and dove. Each time Murieen broke the barrier between water and air, she took in great breaths, tasting salt and cold and, once, a hint of something wild and green blown off the land.

"What is the land called?" she asked Celip, once the guard seemed in a better mood.

"I've heard it is called Eire," Ceilp said.

"Air?" Muireen laughed. "It is a fitting name."

Ceilp shook her head, but there was warmth in her eyes. "It has a different spelling, and a different nuance on the tongue. It is the name for an ancient goddess of the land, and the mortals have called their home accordingly."

Once again, Muireen glanced at the dark length of the island and silently rolled the name on her tongue. Eire. It seemed a little closer than when she'd first glimpsed it upon the horizon, and she was determined to edge closer still.

After a time the porpoises tired of playing, but under pretext of the chase Muireen had managed to maneuver herself and Ceilp nearer to the land. She sculled idly in the waves, letting the breeze explore her face. Then

something tickled the edge of her hearing—a bright, breathy fall of melody that tugged her soul. Music?

“Do you hear that?” She lifted her head. “Oh, Ceilp, might we go a bit closer?”

The older mer set her hands on the two forked daggers belted about her waist, as if to reassure herself of their presence. She glanced up at the sky.

“Music means humans,” she said. “It is too dangerous.”

“Please?” Muireen tried to keep her yearning from showing in her voice. “We’ll be careful. Just—can’t we see where it’s coming from?”

This was her chance to see a human! She could not turn away from the opportunity.

“No.” From Ceilp’s tone, there would be no changing her mind.

Muireen shot a regretful glance at the receding porpoises. They would not provide cover any long, which meant she must seize her opportunity now.

Before her guard could guess what she was about, Muireen dipped beneath the waves and sped in the direction the music had come from, using every trick of speed she knew. Behind her, Ceilp called for her to stop, but Muireen ignored the words.

Closer, closer, until she could hear the notes even beneath the waves, wavering and distorted, falling down like tarnished coins. She shivered with delight. Such a sound, made of breath and mystery, was never heard in the sea kingdom. Just ahead, she saw the curved bottom of a small boat, a promise of adventure riding the waves. Barely slowing, she shot up to the surface.

She rose above the waves long enough to glimpse a slender, dark-haired man leaning against the thin mast of his boat, a length of metal held to his lips.

Then Ceilp grabbed her tail and tugged her down with a splash.

“Foolish girl!” The guard glowered at her from the safety beneath the waves. “It’s time I took you back to the palace.”

“But—”

“No argument.”

Under Ceilp’s watchful eye, Muireen reluctantly turned her back on the bright glimmer of the world above. Her trick would not work a second time.

As they descended through the waters, the greeny-blue quality of the light seemed darker than before, the liquid murmur of the sea a poor echo of the dancing wind and calling gulls who owned the sky.

She closed her eyes, recalling the face and form of the human she’d seen. His cheeks were burnished bronze by the sun and wind, his dark hair worn short. He had seemed not much older than herself, and she wondered why he was all alone in a boat so far from shore.

“The storm’s coming in,” Ceilp said. “Feel it in the current? It’s best we left the surface when we did,”

Muireen did feel it, the first tremor of turmoil and churn, and her heart squeezed in fear for the fisherman playing his music far above. He was some distance from land, and his craft was so small. But there was no use in begging to return to the surface.

Too late, anyhow—the pearly turrets of the palace rose ahead, glowing with luminescence as the water darkened.

At the entrance to her tower, Muireen pulled a long strand of pearls from her hair and turned to Ceilp.

“Thank you for your escort,” she said, handing the guard the pearls. “I will always remember my first journey to the surface.”

“It was an honor.” Ceilp said. “I am glad no trouble came of it.”

“Of course not, with such a capable guard as yourself.” Muireen smiled. “I truly am grateful for your service today.” Most of all, she was glad of seeing the mortal man. But small fishes had big mouths, and she dared not

speak of that encounter. Nothing but trouble would follow if the king knew of it.

“Muireen!” her sister Aila called from the near tower. “You’ve returned safely! Come and tell us about your first breath of air.”

Ceilp made Muireen a formal bow. “I will inform your father that your birthday journey is complete and you’ve returned safely. Good evening, princess.”

“Fine swimming to you,” Muireen replied.

As her her guard departed, she glanced up and up. Barely at the edge of her vision, a faint turbulence roiled. The storm.

Her heart clenched at the thought of the fisherman—but her sisters were expecting her. No matter how much she wanted to surge back to the surface, she could not.

At least, not yet.

Eiric ducked his head as another wave crashed against the side of the boat, the harsh spray coating his face and hands. The wind pummeled him, and he reefed the small sail close, trying to control his craft in the face of the raging elements.

Most of the afternoon he’d spent frustratingly becalmed. When he’d tired of playing his whistle he’d turned to mending the nets, though most of his supplies for such were back at his cottage. Still, it passed the time.

Finally, when the sun dipped low, racing its own reflection in the water, the breeze had sprung up. Brisk at first, then brisker still, until Eiric’s boat ran before a fierce storm. No matter how nimbly he sailed, his heart clenched within him as the shadow of the clouds overtook the last pewter light shimmering on the sea.

All too soon, he’d been engulfed. Dark gray clouds matched the waves, and he lost all sight of the setting sun. Navigating by instinct, he prayed he was still headed east, and not out over the open waters, where death awaited with outstretched arms.

It took all his skill to keep his boat running upon the backs of the waves, and not directly into their hungry mouths. He did not always succeed. Fingers numb with cold, he fought the storm for what felt like hours. His ears were deafened by the rasp of the wind, his eyes stung nearly blind with salt.

Then he heard it—the crack and smash of waves breaking against stone.

He was near land, but not the sweet cove of the bay beside the village. No, he must have come in to the south where mighty cliffs rose, uncaring that a mortal life would be dashed to nothing against the rocks.

Aye, he’d wanted land. But not like this.

Forcing his hands steady, Eiric wove his boat through the water and wind, fighting to turn aside from the implacable cliffs. Hope strained his lungs as the sound of wave on stone began to fade.

Then he was pitched forward as the boat struck something in the water. Crying out, he grabbed for the side. Missed. A glimpse of black rock, splintered wood, and then the sea closed over his head, cold and relentless.

CHAPTER/scene

Muireen waited until indigo darkness filled the sea before slipping out of her tower room. The night guards were posted to keep watch for things coming into the palace, not sneaking out. Keeping to the shadows, she swam carefully until she was some distance from the pearly towers.

Then, with powerful sweeps of her tail, she drove herself up to the surface, angling for the place she'd seen the fisherman. The closer she rose to the ceiling of the sea, the more turbulent the water. The bottoms of the waves pulled at her hair and tried to unbalance her, the swirl of storm spinning her about.

Just before breaking into the air, she recalled her training, and prepared her lungs for the transition.

Harsh wind battered her face and shoulders, so much spray in the air that for a dizzying moment her body did not respond. She choked on salt, on the horrible emptiness above the waves. Shuddering, she thrashed her tail, lifting her high enough that her lungs finally responded.

Gasping, Muireen swept her sticky hair from her face and searched desperately for the fisherman's boat. How could he survive such a rage of smacking water and tearing wind?

There was no sign of him.

Surely he'd made for land at the first sign of storm, and was even now safely at home, far from the grasp of the sea. But even as the sensible part of herself argued that she ought to dive down to safety, something else pulled her on, toward the memory of where the island of Eire lay.

At length a strange sound came to her ears, a rhythmic crash and crack. Before she understood it, the storm threw her forward, and she smacked against the side of a rock jutting from the water.

Pain flashed through her, and she ducked down, away from the greedy hands of the weather above. The power of the storm was blunted beneath the water, and she drew in a steadying gulp, searching for calm. She should not be here, where the rocks waited to tear her body.

A bit of wood brushed her arm, borne by the sucking current. Then another.

It took a moment to realize what it meant.

The debris was new and sharp-edged. Some craft had hit the rocks and wrecked. Panic flashing through her, she turned in a circle, every sense alert.

There! Overhead, she saw the remains of a boat smashing up against the stone. And there…

Time slowed.

Muireen's blood beat stronger than the surge of the waves in her ears. She dove, hands outstretched, for the form of the man sinking to his death. It was the fisherman, and for an instant she saw a silver thread stretching from her heart to his, a path of starlight, of fate.

Then she reached him and wrapped her arms about him, pulling them both up, up, driving through the rough water until she reached the harsh air again. He was heavy against her, and cold, his head lolling. The waves beat at them like fists.

Desperately, she swam, steering away from the terrifying crash of sea on stone. Surely the land held more than the hungry rocks. Breath heaving, she scanned the shoreline. There! A bare crescent of sand beckoned, barely wide enough for a single body, framed by jagged black stone. She forced herself forward, her timing and agility slowed by the body in her arms. The tide threw her up against the side of a rock. She twisted, and the stone left a long, painful scrape down her tail.

Then she was through the worst of the surf, and felt the land rise up, pulling away from the sea. Teeth bared, she thrashed forward, for the first time cursing her tail. Ungainly against the rough grains of sand, she pushed the fisherman before her until he was out of reach of the waves.

He was not breathing.

Awkwardly, she turned him on his side and thumped his back.

"Come now, human," she cried. "Spit out the sea and live. Please."

As if hearing her, his body convulsed. A gush of water emitted from his mouth and he shuddered. Muireen laid her hand between his shoulders and

willed him to breathe.

Another shiver wracked him. He coughed again, and then she felt the blessed pull of air into his body.

“Yes,” she sighed.

His dark hair hid his face and she carefully pushed the sodden strands aside so that she might see his features. His cheeks were pale, but regaining color even as she watched. His lips were too soft for the rest of his face—the sharp nose and stern forehead, the black slashes of his brows.

As she hovered over him, his eyes opened. They were a wild, stormy blue. Muireen stared into those depths, and felt the hook set deep inside her heart.

“You.” His voice was a whispered croak. “Saved me.”

“Shh,” she said. “Rest.”

He closed his eyes and lay his head back down on the sand, but still he breathed. Beneath her hand, Muireen could feel his heart beating. Her fisherman would live.

But she refused to leave him alone through the night.

As the water pulled and pushed in and out of the little cove, she held him close and sang him the songs of the sea people in her low, husky voice. The storm quieted, and as the sky cleared she was amazed to see a shimmer of tiny lights overhead—the luminescence of the night that mortals called stars.

After a time, she realized the blackness was fading, nibbled away at one side of the sky by the approaching dawn. She could not stay, could not risk discovery, though it tore her in two to leave her fisherman.

“Farewell,” she whispered, bending to lay her lips against his.

Their breaths mingled, and a salty drop fell from her eye to splash against his cheek. He stirred, and in a sudden panic, Muireen thrashed herself back into the shelter of the sea. The water took her in, cool and welcoming, concealing the secret of her tail.

She hid behind one of the rocks that had battered her. Her body rocked up and down with the now-quiet waves as she peeked out and watched her fisherman lying upon the beach. Watched as he sat up and rubbed at his face, then looked about him like a man who had misplaced something important. Watched as he rose, and winced, and cast a regretful glance at the splintered boards that had washed ashore in the night.

Watched as he turned his back on the sea and trudged away from her into the light of dawn.

Currents of cold water wrapped about Muireen as she swam into the dusky waters of the Sea Witch’s domain.

She should not be there, venturing into the clammy kelp beds in pursuit of a vain hope, but for the past week she had been unable to think of anything except her fisherman. The sight of him walking away from her haunted her dreams, and her waking hours, until she could barely eat or carry on a conversation.

It will pass, Muireen told herself, but every day was worse than the one before. She could not help remembering the silver thread she’d glimpsed, tying them together. Was this the reason she could scarcely sleep?

A low moaning sound reached her ears, like the call of a whale, but full of menace, not melancholy. She shivered and swam on, toward a blot of darkness visible ahead.

The blackness resolved to a cave mouth. Muireen halted, her hair drifting about her. It was not too late to turn back.

Oh, but it was. The moment she’d glimpsed the fisherman, it had been too late.

With a steadying gulp, she dove forward, into the cave. It was even colder inside the black stone walls, and a faint greenish light emanated from

the depths, a tunnel, leading her on. The sound grew louder, vibrating through Muireen's scales, until she could hardly think, let alone swim.

Then she emerged into a cavern, and the noise ceased. The green light illuminated pale fishes with bulbous eyes and a few sickly strands of waterweed growing from the cavern's sides.

But most of all, it showed the Sea Witch floating in the center of the space, her white eyes turned on Muireen. Hideous white eyes, white skin the color of dead things, suckered tentacles waving from her head, instead of hair. Where her tail should have been was only a swirl of blackness, as though a squid had ejected its ink and fled.

I should not have come. Muireen's chest tightened, and she turned to flee. Rough stone greeted her, slimed with the secretions of moon snails. The tunnel she'd traveled down was gone. Panic racing through her, she pivoted to face the witch.

"Sea King's daughter," the witch said, her voice carrying the memory of a thousand shipwrecks, "I am so very pleased to see you. Tell me, why have you come?"

For a fleeting moment, Muireen was tempted to say it was all a mistake. Tempted to plead that the Sea Witch release her, unharmed, that it had been nothing more than a foolish dare.

But her heart ached where fate bound her to her mortal man. There could be no simple escape from that snare.

"There is a fisherman," she said.

The witch opened her mouth and let out a keening cry of laughter. "Oh yes, yes. One of those. Delicious. Shall I tell you the terms of the bargain?"

"But you don't know what I want," Muireen protested.

The Sea Witch's blank eyes stared at her. "Of course I do. You want to take on the semblance of a mortal girl, so that you might seek out the fisherman you are so foolishly in love with."

“I’m not in love.” Even as she spoke the words, though, a part of Muireen hummed in agreement. “How could I be in love with some ungainly human? I am a princess of the sea.”

The witch held up a hand, black webs spread between her clawed fingers.

“I can see the strands of fate wrapped about your heart,” she said. “You were wise to come to me, for I can give you what you desire. For a price.”

“What is the price?” Muireen’s lips felt numb, as though she’d swum through the poisoned strands of a jellyfish.

“You must give me your voice,” the witch says. “In return, I will be able to transform you into human form—but only for a year and a day. At the end of that time, you will turn back into a mer and re-enter the sea forever.”

A year and a day. It was not long enough—yet it was far better than nothing at all.

“I agr—”

“Wait.” The Sea Witch smiled, showing rows of serrated teeth. “When you return to your form, you will come to me to reclaim your voice. And you will give me one more thing—the bitter tears of your desolation. For in such heart-wrenching sorrow lies great power.”

Muireen glanced away from the witch’s horrifying countenance and thought desperately, but she could see no alternative. Distasteful as the bargain might be, she must take it.

“It seems I have little choice,” she said.

“That is truer than all the pearls in the sea,” the witch said. “Now, open your mouth and sing your favorite lullaby.”

From somewhere, she conjured a glass bottle and held it over her head.

“Sing,” she commanded.

Muireen began, and she could almost see her voice disappearing into the bottle. Slowly, the glass turned a translucent silver-blue: the exact hue of

her scales. When the song ended, she glanced down to see that her tail was leached to a sickly gray.

Her gasp of dismay was only a breath. When she tried to form words, nothing came out but little bursts of warm water.

“It is done.” The witch tucked the bottle away. “Go now, daughter of the Sea King. Rise to the land, and when you exit the sea, your tail will disappear and you will walk upon two legs. Or attempt to.” She let out a harsh cackle. “I will look forward to your visit a year and a day hence.”

The Sea Witch raised her hands and pushed, and a sudden dark current swept Muireen up. It bore her quickly through the tunnel and past the wavering kelp, through indigo waters to turquoise, and then pale blue.

With one final surge, it pushed her upon the shore—the same small beach where she’d taken her fisherman.

Muireen gasped and coughed, her lungs unprepared for the transition. Then fierce pain gripped her from the waist down. She opened her mouth, but had no voice to scream. She could only watch in mute horror as her tail disappeared, leaving two spindly stalks in its place.

Legs.

That she must learn to walk upon.

For five days, Eiric rested in the bed he’d inherited from his parents. The white walls of the cottage wrapped around him, the breeze rustled the thatch overhead, reassuring him that he was safe.

The villagers brought him broth and helped him rise to use the chamber pot. Biddy was there more often than most, but Eiric did not have the energy to turn away. Fevers wrung him, and a thousand aches from being tumbled against the rocks below the cliffs.

“It’s a miracle he survived,” the people whispered. “He is truly blessed by the gods.”

He did not feel blessed, but cursed. Whenever he closed his eyes to rest, which was often, nightmares of the crashing sea sucked him under.

Again and again he fought to turn his boat, heard the sickening crack of the hull on stone, felt the hungry cold grasp of the waves. The only thing that made his dreams bearable was the memory of a young woman’s face, looking down at him.

Her eyes were the warm blue of the sea at midday. Her long hair held brightness and shadow, tangled with sea foam. Her skin was pale, her hands upon his brow cool and welcome.

Each time he woke, Eiric was filled with a pang of loss. Had he imagined her, or had she rescued him from the storm’s hunger?

A smaller, more urgent loss pained him as well, and that was the loss of his boat. He would have to go back to using the small leather coracle that had been his first vessel. No more venturing out into the deep deep waters, where the catch was best. No more room to stow his finest nets. He feared it would be a lean winter.

Biddy would feed you, his thoughts offered up.

He could not think of it—not when the pearl-skinned girl haunted his dreams. And his wakings.

A week unspooled past, and Eiric finally woke feeling… not rested, exactly, but well enough to get out of bed and see if anything salvageable had washed ashore in the tiny cove that had saved him.

He took a hunk of bread stuffed with cheese, a skin of water, and a stout walking stick that had belonged to his Da, and set out over the headland. The sun warmed his shoulders and the top of his head, and he felt as though his life might be worth living, after all.

It took him some time to reach the narrow path cutting through the bracken that led to the tiny beach. He’d had to rest often, and twice refilled

his water skin from the small stream that crisscrossed his path.

His lunch called to him, but he'd be better off saving it for after he'd visited the shore. A reward for the hike back up the steep trail, which, in truth, he was not looking forward to.

For now, though, gravity aided him and soon the crash of the waves against the cliffs filled the air. It took all his concentration to keep his feet under him as he made the last descent to the sliver of sand below.

His boots hit the sand and he stood a moment catching his balance and his breath. Then lost them both when he saw he was not alone.

She was there—the maiden who haunted his thoughts, sitting huddled against a rock, facing the sea. Her long hair covered her like a cloak, but she was naked, the pearly skin of her limbs shining in the sun.

Heartbeat thundering in his ears, Eiric glanced about the little cove, looking for her clothing, or her selkie skin, anything that would help him learn what kind of creature she was. For though she appeared mortal, he knew deep in his soul that she was a magical being.

Sensing his presence, she spun awkwardly about and fixed him with her blue, blue eyes.

"Don't be afraid," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I won't harm you, I swear it."

He could not bear it if she fled back into the waves.

To his relief, she gave him a tentative smile and made no move toward the shining water.

"I'm Eiric," he said, little caring that he might be giving his name to a faerie. Even if she were a fey maiden, he feared he'd already lost his heart to her. Anything more was a trifle. "Do you understand me?"

She nodded, and the beauty in her face made him weak at the knees.

"Have you a name you go by?" he asked.

Again she nodded. Then, with a stricken look, she brought her hand up to her throat and shook her head.

“You cannot speak?”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“Well then.” Eiric settled on the sand. “Still, you and I might converse together in other ways.”

A quick nod of her head.

“Where have you come from?”

She turned, hair slipping off one pale shoulder, and gestured at the sea. So, it was as he thought.

“Might I call you Muireann? It means ‘sea fair’ in my language. And you are very fair.”

She blushed slightly and dropped her gaze to the sand. Eiric was hard pressed not to stare openly at her nakedness. Instead, he pulled off his shirt and handed it to her.

“You might put this on, if you like.”

Giving him a smile as quick as a silver fish, she held the garment up, studying it a moment before pulling it over her head. She had difficulty with the arm holes, and he reached to help her, drawing one fine-boned hand through the sleeve, and then the other.

“You’re not used to clothing, I take it.”

He was rewarded with another of her darting smiles.

“I think…” He stared at the waves gnashing upon the rocks. “I think you saved me, sea-fair maiden. Was that you?”

In answer, she rose to her knees a bit unsteadily, then cupped his face between her hands. He held very still, as though she were a wild thing he did not want to frighten. Gods, but she was beautiful. And strong, and brave, by all indications.

Softly, she kissed him on the forehead.

Her touch was enough to undo him. Eiric gathered her into his arms and held her close. Her heart beat fast, and her skin was cool, but not cold.

Gently, quietly, they kissed, and his heart, at last, felt as though it had come home.

Muireen could scarce believe her luck. Her fisherman had come to seek her out! Joy surged through her in great waves, despite the awkward feel of her new body. And though she could not speak, they understood one another well enough.

She sat, nestled against his side, and marveled at the warmth of his human body. Together, they watched the waves come in, until the tide nibbled at their toes. With a sigh, Eiric turned to look at her.

“The sun’s soon to be setting. I suppose you must return to the sea now, fair maid, though my heart weeps at losing you.”

She shook her head at him.

“No?” His eyes widened. “Is it possible you might come live with me, and be my bride?”

She hesitated, but there was no way to explain that she must return to the sea in a year’s time. That was a dim cloud on the horizon. After all, a year was a very long while.

She answered him with a kiss.

“Then, my love, we’d best away before dark. We can come another time to search for the wreckage of my boat—if any still remains.”

She nodded, and let him pull her to her feet. For a moment she tottered, but with his help found her balance. Walking was more difficult, though, and she let out a little hiss of pain when she stubbed her toe on an outcropping.

“Sit here a moment.” He guided her to a rock, then bent and took off his foot coverings.

They came in two parts, she was interested to observe. Mortal clothing was very strange.

“I fear my boots will be too large, and trip you further in any case. But my socks will give you some protection.”

He held out the cloth wrappings, then helped her don them. They were warm from his body, and smelled rather strongly, but she was glad of the layer between her tender new skin and the ground.

“Now, Muireann, we must climb to the top of the headland and walk a fair bit before reaching my village. Luckily, it will be dark, so we can avoid the worst of the questions until tomorrow. Are you ready?”

She nodded. No matter what difficulties lay ahead, and she was certain there would be many, it would be worth it with her fisherman by her side.

A moon passed, and though the villagers still treated Muireen with suspicion, they had come to accept she was there to stay. All except the flame-haired Biddy, who spat and made the sign of protection whenever their paths crossed.

Together, Muireen and Eiric had managed to pull his wrecked boat from the rocks. Paired with another ruined craft, they’d cobbled together an ugly but seaworthy boat that could take the two of them over the waves.

For though Eiric tried to protest, Muireen was determined to go out with him upon the sea. She’d let him fish alone in his small coracle, and helped him gut and salt the fish he returned with, but she refused to waste their precious time by pining on land, waiting for him.

It was an advantage of not being able to speak, that she simply demonstrated her intent with actions. Though he pleaded, Muireen refused to leave her place at the prow of the boat, and so they set out together.

They worked well together, plying the nets and taking in the fish, And if once or twice Muireen spotted the trailing hair of a mer warrior beneath their boat, she was not alarmed.

No doubt her father had been full of wrath when he'd discovered her bargain with the Sea Witch—but such things could not be broken. Instead, it seemed he'd sent his guard to keep watch on her.

In the evenings, Eiric played his whistle as they sat before the fire in their little cottage. Muireen learned how to cook, though she was ever wary of the flames. She learned to sew, and to knit ungainly socks and sweaters that, while not lovely to behold, kept them warm as the night darkened.

After two moons, she was with child.

"Please jump the broom with me," Eiric said. "We should be handfasted. If not for your sake, then for the babe."

Muireen had refused each time he'd spoken of it before. She was far more comfortable going from cottage to sea and back, content in the simple life they'd woven for themselves. Putting herself on display before the villagers made the old fear rise, that they'd see her as a mer creature and kill her on the spot.

But for him, and the little creature now swimming in her belly, she agreed.

The day of the ceremony dawned bright and clear. Eiric and Muireen broke their fast, and then he turned to her, smiling.

"My love, I'll leave you now to make ready. Orla has kindly agreed to come help you prepare."

They kissed, and then a knock came at the cottage door. Shy, dark-haired Orla stepped in, carrying a dress the color of sea foam at sunrise.

"I brought you this. It's been in my family for two generations. I thought I might be wed in it, but…" She glanced at Eiric, regret in her eyes. "Anyhow, I'd like you to wear it, Muireann."

Muireen brought her hands together and bowed in thanks. It was very generous. Perhaps—the thought stabbed her heart—perhaps in ten months, when she was gone, Orla might take her place.

Or perhaps not. The love between herself and Eiric was a strong, true bond. She feared he might go mad from losing her, which was part of why she'd refused to wed him. But now there was the babe.

Smiling, she set her hand over her belly. At least there would be some part of her remaining when she returned to the sea.

The ceremony was held on the headland, the bright ocean shining beneath. Eiric said the words, and Muireen emphatically nodded her agreement. Together they let the priestess tie a braided cord about their clasped hands, then jumped the broom while the villagers cheered.

That night they feasted on mutton and ale, and Muireen felt, for a small time, part of the human world.

Despite her insistence on going out in the boat with him, the time came when Muireen's belly was too large for her to be of much use. Too, a melancholy had settled in her soul. Only three months remained until she must leave Eiric forever and return to the sea. Ah, and the Sea Witch would reap well her harvest of tears, for already the sorrow of parting felt unbearable.

Eiric attributed her moods to the state of her body, and was ever patient and kind with her. If he feared that the babe growing within her was less than human, he never spoke a word.

She worried, though, with thoughts that kept her awake and fretting into the cold nights. What if the child was born with fins, or a tail? What if she and the baby were cast out, or killed?

Be well, she thought fiercely at the little life inside her. *Be human.*

From one day to the next, spring came upon the land. The days grew longer and a warm wind blew over the sea.

And Muireen bore a baby girl, with no fins or tail, and her father's dark hair.

"We shall call her Brea," her father said, holding her up and smiling bright as the dawn.

Caught between great joy and great sorrow, Muireen smiled at him through her tears, and nodded. Now that her baby, her daughter, was born, she knew the pain of leaving would be doubled.

But for the month that remained to her upon the land, she could not let that shadow fall over her days. So, with great effort, she pushed it away. Instead, she concentrated on all the perfect moments: Eiric's smile and the scent of him, the soft skin of her daughter, the warmth the three of them made, curled up together in their bed.

The moon waned, and went dark, and that night Muireen dreamed of the Sea Witch.

"Tomorrow," the witch said. "Tomorrow you come back to the sea. If you are not in the water's embrace by sunset, your legs will disappear and you will be revealed for what you truly are. And you will be killed for it."

Muireen woke, shivering, and knew the witch spoke truly. Even if Eiric tried to protect her, he would not be able to stand against the villagers. In her mer form she would be too strange, too frightening. They would take her life, and little Brea's as well.

When Eiric woke and made ready to go out to his boat, she caught his arm and shook her head at him. *Don't go.*

"What's this, love?" He gazed down tenderly at her.

She touched her heart, then his, then glanced down at the babe sleeping in her arms. This was their last day together.

"Aye, I love you and our family with all my heart. But I must go out and fish."

She took his arm again, all her sorrow rising in her eyes, and he relented.

“Very well. But only for today.”

She gave a small nod. Yes. Only that day—for tomorrow she would be gone forever.

She packed a lunch, put Brea in her sling, and they roved out over the headland. Eiric collected a bouquet of wildflowers for her, and she kissed him, wishing that she could speak of what was to come.

They ate, drank cool water from the stream, and she led him to the path down to the tiny beach where they’d first met. The first shadows from the lowering sun began to fall across the land.

“Should we not be returning home?” he asked.

She shook her head and started down the path. How comfortable her legs had become in a year, how deftly she stepped around stones, feeling herself balance upright in the air. Even carrying the small weight of her baby, it seemed a simple thing, to stride across the land.

When they reached the sliver of sand, she sat, facing the ocean.

Eiric settled beside her, one strong arm around her shoulders as she fed Brea for the last time. When the baby was finished, Muireen handed her to her father, her arms aching with loss.

The banners of the clouds were beginning to turn silvery orange. Heart aching, Muireen stood and stripped off her clothing: shawl, blouse, skirts and shoes. She unbraided her hair until it fell loose about her shoulders, brushing her back and belly.

Eiric watched, his gaze solemn.

When she went to her knees before him, a single tear slipped from his eye.

“Ah, beloved.” His voice was choked with sorrow. “Is this our end, then? Must you return to the sea and leave me cruelly alone?”

She set her hand on Brea’s head, then looked deep into the eyes of her fisherman. *Be strong*, *for our daughter*, she thought, even as her heart was breaking.

Their lips met. The sun dipped lower, kissing the horizon.

Then Muireen pulled away and flung herself back, into the arms of the sea. Pain ripped through her as her legs cleaved together. She gasped, and in that moment found her voice.

“Remember me, Eiric,” she called. “You are my true love.”

“As you are mine, sea maid.” He rose, cradling their child in his arms. “Will I ever see you again?”

“Look for me in the bright dance of the waves. In the foam upon the shore. Where you go, there, too, my heart goes.”

Uncaring of the pain—what was one more stab when her soul was shattering?—she hooked her fingers beneath one of the scales of her newfound tail and ripped it free. Even as a dark current swirled in to bear her away to the Sea Witch, she flung the scale to shore.

The last thing she heard was the sobbing of her husband, the thin wail of their child.

“Oh, such bounty,” crooned the Sea Witch as she captured Muireen’s tears. “Not only mourning the loss of your love but of your baby. Such power.”

At last Muireen pulled away from the witch, shuddering, her grief drained dry.

“A pity that’s the last of it.” The Sea Witch held up the vial containing Muireen’s sorrow. “Or is it? Tell me—where is your missing scale?” She pointed at the gap in Muireen’s tail.

“I threw it to him,” Muireen said, defiantly.

“Ahh. Listen then, and I will offer you joy and despair in equal measure. Every year, upon this anniversary, I can use my magic to let you see the world of the mortals, via the scale you left behind. I hope your husband keeps it safe and close by.”

“He will.”

“Then you will be able to gaze upon him, and your child, for a brief time And when you say farewell and once again the anguish falls upon you, I will take it for my own uses. Do you agree?”

“Will he be able to see me, too?”

“Of course, for that will make the pain all the greater.” The witch gave her a horrible smile. “Since your pain prolongs my life, I welcome it.”

Muireen did not like to think she was helping the Sea Witch in any way. And yet, to be able to see Eiric and her daughter once a year, however briefly, was a chance she could not refuse.

“Very well.”

“Good! And luckily you’ll be out of the palace dungeons next year, just in time. Now go, back to your foolish father and worthless siblings, and give them my regards.”

Again the dark current bore Muireen through the reaches of the sea, depositing her where the indigo water faded into greeny blue. Tiredly, she swam toward the pearly towers of the palace, ready to bear whatever punishment her father thought just.

Some day, though, she vowed she would make the Sea Witch reunite her and her mortal love.

The first time the silver scale lit with Muireen’s image, Eiric thought he was dreaming. Gods knew, he dreamt of her constantly. But to his surprise, he could hear her, too.

“I have not much time, love,” she said. “It is only through the magic of the Sea Witch that I may look upon you. Tell me, how do you fare? And our child?”

He showed her Brea, sleeping in her crib, told her all was well. Too soon, the light of the scale began to dim.

“When shall I see you again?” he cried.

“Next year.” Her voice faded, and the cool silvery blue scale reflected back the light of his candle.

Ah, the pain was worse after seeing her face. And yet, knowing that she still lived, that she cared for him and their child, was enough to soothe the worst of the ache.

Every year, for a brief time, magic imbued the scale and Eiric was able to tell Muireann he loved her still. For he did, the flame of that love still burning fresh within him. He showed her how their daughter grew, and shared her milestones—first steps, first words, first swim in the sea which, thankfully, had not resulted in her sprouting fins or a tail.

“She is not a mer,” Muireann said, “for never have our kind bred true with humans.”

“I’m not certain she’s entirely human, though,” Eiric replied. “There is an odd touch of magic about her.”

“Then perhaps she’s a fey water creature of some kind. But she must find her own destiny.”

Then the scale went quiet, and all other words must wait for another year.

It was not a pleasant thing, to bide so long, but it was enough. Eiric replayed their brief conversations in his head, traced her beloved features in memory, over and over. Their daughter grew into a lonely, quiet girl, and his heart ached within him for her solitude. He never spoke of her mother. That burden he would bear alone.

Many years passed, until one day while Eiric was out on his boat, the sky darkened with a sudden storm. He'd weathered storms aplenty but this one felt different—full of menace. He quickly stowed his nets, the memory of the fierce gale that had nearly taken his life shivering through him.

This storm tasted the same, the air heavy and metallic with the rising wind.

Then it was upon him, waves churning, spray blinding his eyes. This time, he was too far from land, fishing over the deep waters. There would be no escape from the ocean's wrath.

Still, he tried, fighting to keep his boat upon the waves and not under them, bailing when he could. Although Brea was nearly grown, he did not want to leave her an orphan, both parents lost to the sea.

But he was given no choice in the matter. A great, black wave rose over his boat, then smashed down, punching him to the depths.

Eiric floated, blinking against the salt water burning his eyes. Here, beneath the waves, it was strangely peaceful. The last of his breath left his body in a silver strand of bubbles, racing away toward the roiling surface. He let them go.

Then Muireann was there, floating before him. She pressed a bottle to his lips and he drank, then gagged on the foul secretion.

"Swallow it," she said, tears in her voice. "I cannot you save you, otherwise."

Coldness all about him, Eiric swallowed. Then screamed as the cold burned away. Something terrible was happening to him, yet his sea maiden held him close.

Finally, shuddering, the pain passed. He looked up at his beloved.

"Are we dead?" he asked, amazed to find he could form the words.

“No, my love.” She smiled at him. “You are no longer human, however. There is no return to the surface for you.”

“As long as I might remain here, beneath the sea with you, I care not. Wherever you go—”

“There my heart also goes,” she finished the words for him.

Together, webbed hands clasped, they swam, tails flashing through the water. Away from the storm and darkness, away from the cold, to an enchanted palace in the far south, made of shining coral.

There they rule to this day, wearing crowns of pearl and mantles of kelp, the Sea Queen and her once-mortal love.

Author’s Note

The Little Mermaid is my inspiration for this story. And while I wanted to incorporate some of the tragic elements from Hans Christian Andersen’s original tale, I still wanted a fairytale happy ending for Muireen and her fisherman, no matter the sorrow it took them to get there.

To find out what happens to Brea, Muireen and Eiric’s daughter, pick up Brea’s Tale and discover the magic of Feyland!

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